

All Wards NPA Concerning Memorial Auditorium

September 26, 2017

6:30 - 8:30 pm

City Hall, Contois Auditorium
Draft Minutes

Start: 6:33

Steering Committee Members Present: Chris Trombly-Ward 7, Adrian Pascaul-Ward 3, Charles Simpson-Ward 6, Barbara McGrew, Martha Molpus-Ward 7, Nate Orshan-Ward 5, Jim Holway-Ward 4, Tony Redington-Ward 2

Introduction, Ground Rules, Questionnaire

The assembly is instructed to respect the agenda, to listen to one another, to share options politely, to respect each other, and to respect the timekeeper. Conversation is limited to two minutes.

Video Tour Martha Keenan tour of Memorial Auditorium

<https://www.cctv.org/watch-tv/programs/memorial-auditorium-tour>

Brief History of Memorial Auditorium

Presented by Tom Visser, Head of UVM Dept. of Historical Preservation:

Students at UVM completed a project looking at Burlington historical landmarks from the 1920s. During this project, a student researched the background of Memorial Auditorium's creation, and said student's research is available at assembly and online.

Discussion of the building's place in Burlington's history:

In 1925, the Burlington Free Press editor called for new city hall, and plans were presented in 1926. However, citizens were dissatisfied by the large scale of the proposal, and a plan for a new city hall was soon revealed, this one lacking an auditorium but with plans for a separate auditorium nearby.

In March of 1926, Burlington voters approved the construction of architect Frank L. Austin's design for the 4000-seat Memorial Auditorium, as well as several consecutive bonds for its funding.

The grand opening of Memorial was held in 1928 to a crowd of 3000, and the mayor proclaimed the building "a tribute to those living and dead who served their country well." The following weeks were packed with events including balls, an orchestra, a boxing match, and a Republican party caucus. The building was used in the coming years by several organizations, notably by US Immigration and Naturalization and by the Burlington Welfare Department to distribute food to needy citizens. Simon &

Garfunkel, Barry Goldwater, the 242 Main rock show, and numerous other spectacles moved through the Auditorium, and in 1988 the building was recorded on a national registry of historic sites.

In 2012, concerns were raised about deferred maintenance on the building, and in 2016, the city closed Memorial Auditorium and evicted its users.

Overview of the Building

Alan Abair, former Memorial Auditorium property manager:

Mr. Abair recalls many fond memories of attending events at Memorial Auditorium in his youth, and then elaborates on his role in managing the building. He explains that Bernie Sanders was elected mayor in the 1980s and sought to improve arts in the city. Sanders viewed Memorial Auditorium as underutilized, and so put together a committee (of which Mr. Abair was a member) to take over management in 1983. The committee set out to 1. increase community use of the building and 2. improve commercial use of the building. Activities in the building soon increased to some 700 events per year, the city organizations from Parks and Recreation to CEDO hosted many programs on the property. Mr. Abair's committee initiated a marketing campaign to publicize the building and to bring in new talent and new shows.

Mr. Abair describes how the economics of the Auditorium involved direct incomes (payment of people or organizations involved in events - tech, radio stations, ushers, crew, etc.) and the benefit of increased business to restaurants, hotels, gas stations, and other city businesses.

Mr. Abair believes that nothing had been done by the city in 20 years to deal with the basic needs of the structure, and guesses that a landlord with the same practices would be in trouble with code enforcement. He is also disturbed by a lack of "real entertainment" in society, stating that modern, electronic entertainment is different from live entertainment. He wants Memorial to be saved "one way or another"; if it is not maintained as a performing arts center, the city would be obligated to provide another option to preserve the structure for the community.

Mr. Abair is applauded by the assembly and thanked for his service to Memorial Auditorium.

Town Hall Style Open Forum

A speaker played the venue many times and has an emotional connection to it, but he states that if the economics don't work out, he doesn't mind Memorial being taken down. He encourages the city to try to save the building, but if they cannot, to create another such space in its place.

Sharon Forbush, a current city counselor, recalls attending many performances at Memorial. She remembers many events that brought the community together yet didn't cost much money, and thinks that such community bonding is lacking in society today (this is met by applause). She states that "in the United States we don't value anything old" (applause), and claims that the city has mistreated the building.

A speaker grew up in Burlington and is opposed to the destruction of old structures at the risk of the city's history. He asks why the city would build another venue when there is one already in existence, and disagrees with the city spending money on new buildings instead of the preservation of at least Memorial's façade.

A speaker recalls that the old teen center within Memorial was a "safe space" for people who felt unwelcome to express themselves elsewhere, and says that it is important for the city to allocate resources for similar people to whom the building was more than just a venue.

A speaker asks for investigative reporting from the Burlington Free Press into who was responsible for deferring maintenance on Memorial.

Speakers propose many uses for a renovated Memorial, from improving access to food for needy community members to constructing wooden rowboats with students to allow citizens to better utilize the waterfront.

A speaker asks for an explanation of the city government process involved in decision making and planning future action surrounding Memorial. The moderator suggests that other community members or officials with better information answer that question.

Several speakers feel that the community and/or the city are allowing business interests to interfere with history or community needs.

A speaker believes the draw of the city stems from its community life and public infrastructure, and that a big part of that infrastructure is Memorial. He also states that as a memorial to war veterans, the building must be protected.

Two speakers say that Memorial supports a musical culture in which they feel the city is lacking.

Several speakers state that they feel encouraged by community involvement with Memorial displayed at the assembly.

A speaker invites listeners to visit [Save 242 Main website](#) and to read the petition for the preservation of the structure.

A speaker believes that economic decision-making in the city should be the authority of the NPAs, and proposes a resolution to City Council and the mayor instructing them to preserve the structure and to authorize the NPAs to oversee that it is used for community means going forward.

A young entrepreneur speaks about her own need for the type of space that would be provided by a renovated Memorial.

A speaker proposes that the older community members present work to draw in younger members to increase support for Memorial's preservation.

A speaker proposes that renovation work on the building could come from vocational centers and from recent immigrants or younger workers.

The Next Step

The assembly is reminded that the NPAs have the ability to offer advisory motion to City Council and the mayor, and the speaker who had proposed a resolution during the open forum takes the stage. She restates her resolution as the following:

a motion to advise City Council and the mayor to maintain Memorial Auditorium in perpetuity as a publicly-owned community commons, and to empower and honor an NPA-led public process to determine and ensure that the future uses of Memorial Auditorium reflect public priorities

A member of the assembly proposes a vote on the resolution, and discussion begins over the use of the word "advise," some suggesting stronger word choice. The assembly is reminded that the resolution, if passed, would be "advisory" by default and therefore the language is not of great importance.

Discussion begins over the implications of passing the resolution without prior notification in the published agenda that any such vote would take place that night. This is stated to be against bylaws, but the assembly is reminded that NPAs are independent bodies and therefore such regulations operate more as suggestions.

There is dissent from several audience members about language in the resolution implying that it is a consensus of all the Burlington NPAs, when in theory it would be passed by only those members present that night. It is clarified that if passed, the measure would be brought to individual NPAs for their approval of the language before it would be presented to the city.

It is proposed that the resolution be split into two, separate resolutions to clarify the opinions of the assembly on each of the individual clauses within the original document. After some discussion and clarification, the two resolutions are decided to be as follows:

1. *a motion to advise City Council and the mayor to maintain Memorial Auditorium in perpetuity as a publicly-owned community commons*

2. *a motion to advise City Council and the mayor to empower and honor an NPA-led public process to determine and ensure that the future uses of Memorial Auditorium reflect public priorities*

A motion to vote on the Resolution 1 is seconded and the resolution passes.

There is a general agreement to change the language in Resolution 2 to a motion to send the resolution itself to the other NPAs, instead of directly to City Council and the mayor as the original language would have directed. A motion to vote on this amended resolution is seconded and the resolution passes.

Questionnaire Results

Would you support the city finding funding from various sources to restore the Memorial Auditorium for civic and cultural uses

YES - 51

NO - 9

Would you support the city tearing down the Memorial Auditorium and building a new Auditorium on the same site?

YES - 8

NO - 49

MAYBE - 3

Would you support the city selling the Memorial Auditorium property to other entities like UVM or private developers?

YES - 3

NO - 57

End 8:42

Minutes taken by Ben Lahey, CEDO intern